

EPISODE #13: Lauren Sarah Hayes

Listening To Ladies

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Interviewee: Lauren Sarah Hayes (**LSH**)

ECB: This episode of Listening to Ladies is supported in part by the Irving S. Gilmore Foundation, in partnership with 102.1 WMUK.

I'm Elisabeth Blair and this is Listening to Ladies.

LSH: My name is Lauren Sarah Hayes. I'm a performer, improviser, and composer working with live electronic music. And at the moment, I'm assistant professor of Sound Studies at Arizona State University.

[excerpt of **15 Seconds** plays]

ECB: This is a recording of a performance in Hamilton Mausoleum in Scotland.

LSH: Which has the longest echo of any man made structure with fifteen second echo.

[excerpt of **15 Seconds** plays]

LSH: So that was really challenging, obviously any sound you make just becomes really drawn out and I do a lot of really fast gestural stuff usually. So that was a really challenging space, but it was quite amazing. The tour guides of the mausoleum were giving the audience a tour of the crypt before the performance and then we sat in the round inside this mausoleum that looked like a Masonic ritual or something.

[excerpt of **15 Seconds** plays]

LSH: Working at the mausoleum was great because we had all the museum staff involved. The people who gave tours of the place, who had been working there for years, I mean they knew all the stories about it, the gory details about the Duke who had it built, which is a fascinating story.

[excerpt of **15 Seconds** plays]

LSH: He was obsessed with ancient Egypt and actually became mummified after he died and bought this sarcophagus that he wanted to be displayed in the center of this mausoleum, but unfortunately, the sizing was wrong and it was too small for him. So there's all these gory details about how they actually fettered him inside the sarcophagus.

[excerpt of **15 Seconds** plays]

LSH: So working with people who really have a cultural and social connection to locations and spaces I think is something that I want to get more into with this work. I think it's nice to be able to do this sort of guerrilla style thing, where you maybe just turn up and do something spontaneously, but also I think working with local communities is really interesting for me and hopefully rewarding for those people as well to be involved.

[excerpt of **15 Seconds** plays]

LSH: I was really fortunate as a child. My family was really supportive of creativity through music and arts and crafts. I was always going to art shops to take part in different children's groups where we would maybe create jewelry or make models. And my family were also very musical. So there were always music sessions happening in my home.

ECB: Neither of her parents worked in creative occupations, but her father had been in a band in the 60s and both of her parents played guitar and piano.

LSH: I started piano lessons at four and I actually have some notated music that I wrote and it says, "Lauren Hayes, age 6". And it just amazes me when I look at it, because it was kind of avant garde at the age of six. There are two pieces that I have the scores for.

ECB: One was called Boom in G[no bars].

LSH: And it was a piano piece, two hands, I think I was trying to be ahead of my time by not putting in the bars, it was probably just because I didn't know how to actually work out the timings. And another piece which was called The Floating Tune, which I remember writing half of it on the piano and then I decided that I needed to finish it for my next piano lesson. So I remember writing the other half of it away from the piano, just kind of making it up in my head, and that half was, yeah, pretty awful, so my piano teacher helped me correct the second half of it. But I still have these and sometimes I look at them just because they are they're really amusing and it's kind of fascinating to look back and think that I was using notation at that age.

ECB: If you visit the show notes page for this episode on the Listening to Ladies website, you will see a photograph of The Floating Tune.

By the time Lauren was about eight, the family had acquired a nice piano and she spent a lot of time on it.

LSH: Emulating modern music, contemporary music that I obviously heard on the radio. My mom listened to a lot of classical music as well. And I think that it was really amusing and I'd play all the bass notes and then jump up to the high notes and kind of emulate that style, but I would be improvising for hours. But of course, when you are young, you don't know that that's a valid form of music making, so that's just something that's noise and you are eventually told to stop playing like that. So I think it's a really interesting thing that, that was something that I naturally decided to do, but eventually stopped when you know, I sort of learned that that wasn't the proper way to play the piano.

ECB: She continued taking piano lessons, then at the age of 11 started taking electric guitar lessons. She later played in punk bands up through her undergraduate degree - which, by the way, wasn't in music. She studied mathematics and philosophy at the University of Edinburgh.

And then, a friend of hers moved to China and left her with a lot of interesting audio equipment - a sound card, microphones, an Akai synthesizer, hardware reverb and effects units. So she started playing with all this and she also moved about twelve miles out of the city and into an old white farmhouse.

LSH: And you could make as much noise as you liked, because there were no neighbors.

ECB: And it was this experience that eventually led her to do a masters degree in Digital Composition and Performance-and after that, a PhD.

[excerpt of **Bridalveil** plays]

ECB: At the beginning of this episode, Lauren mentioned guerrilla-style performances, and what you're listening to now is what she calls a guerrilla improvisation.

LSH: We'll just turn up somewhere and I'll be carrying kit, and we'll do something. So we did stuff under a tunnel in Yosemite, which sounded amazing.

ECB: Specifically, next to **Bridalveil** Fall.

[excerpt of **Bridalveil** plays]

ECB: Lauren is especially interested in the relationships between sound and touch.

LSH: So when I started first performing with computers, I really missed the physical forces, effort, and struggles that you spend years trying to overcome with an acoustic instrument. So I just found it really unrewarding that I would click my trackpad and hear a really big sound, but didn't feel, I didn't in any way perform that sound, it was kind of too easy. So that became an area of my research, how to put physicality back into electronic or digital music. And that led to working with forced feedback controllers. So controllers where you can actually feel different sensations, whether it's banging into a virtual wall or feeling that you are moving very slowly through something viscous like honey. Another aspect of it was missing the sensation of sound that you get through the resonating body of an acoustic instrument, which is something that all acoustic musicians make use of when they are performing. So I developed this, what I call vibrotactile feedback device, which basically maps the sound onto vibrations that I felt on my skin when I was performing and it made up for that physical resonance that I wasn't getting through the laptop. Then that led into, ok well if I can use this as a performer, how can the audience also experience this? Because we all know what it's like to experience bass through our feet, right, in the club or something. So I thought, "Can this also be a compositional device?" So I created a piece of furniture called Skin Music, which was an audio-haptic composition, which means it was for the ears and the body.

[excerpt of **Skin Music** plays]

ECB: You're listening to a very limited representation of this music, because you're only experiencing the audio, and not the sensations.

LSH: So I would have the piece composed as sound but also as sensation, so there were various motors placed inside this chaise longue that an audience member would lie back on and they feel vibrations moving up their spine into their head. I'd also work with tactile transducers, which are just like bass

shakers basically, so you can send a really low frequency sound directly into someone's spine or feet. So composing that with the sounds was really interesting.

[excerpt of **Skin Music** plays]

LSH: And I am trying to look at ways that we can physically experience some of the auditory illusions that we can hear, so looking at, can we experience something like shepard tones, where it sounds like the sound is continuously moving upwards, can we experience that physically on the body, or looking at, can we move a sound through the body and then out into space and how will that play with our perception?

I think I'm more of what I call a sound sculptor, in that I try and shape the music with the physical tools that I have, so I don't see composition or performance as a cerebral process for me, it's definitely about throwing all the things together and sitting and improvising, experimenting and yeah, sculpting the sound.

[excerpt of **Skin Music** plays]

ECB: For about a decade, Lauren has been working with an arts charity called Art Link.

LSH: Working with people with profound and complex learning difficulties, and for me it really informs the work that I am doing and I will take bits of my technology that I'll use in performance and take it into these other scenarios, so it might just be a workshop where we're sitting listening to music, but perhaps people are hugging an object that's vibrating with the sounds or I might be putting vibrotactile feedback more directly onto somebody's hands. Sometimes I would just play piano and have people holding vibrating speakers to give a more direct correlation between the sound and giving them some kind of tactile sensation. I've worked with a couple of people with Autism and it's really about me bringing some potential things into the space but ultimately they will direct what's going to happen. So one time I brought lots of gadgets and synthesizers and things into the room hoping to run this session and the man just walked around and immediately found the off switch that I brought and just you know, decided I don't want to use that, that, that. And then went over to my computer and wanted to play cds on that and it was just fantastic because it just shows that when you are working with these different communities, you can never just come in with an idea that you want to impose on someone, it has to be a long process based from that person's desires, working closely with their family, with the art charities I was working with, with perhaps psychologist, with care workers, and it's always a really long term thing as well, so yeah, I've learned so much from being in those situations.

ECB: Earlier I mentioned that, as an undergraduate student, Lauren studied math and philosophy, not music. I asked her about that.

LSH: It's really interesting because the philosophy and maths I most enjoyed studying where pure mathematics, not applied maths, things like complex analysis, things that were kind of math for math's sake, which I find really interesting, but maybe not applicable always to things in the real world, perhaps. Same with philosophy, I was really interested in ancient philosophy over things like, say ethics. But this was a long time ago and I think both these subjects have really helped me to do what I do now. So for example, I refer a lot to continental philosophers, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who talks a lot about the role of the body and understanding how we are in the world, so I think it's definitely helped me to explain the things I'm looking at when I am designing new instruments or technologies, and it opens me up to other areas and other ideas.

ECB: And the math side of it has been helpful with programming.

LSH: So I'd never done any programming really, apart from using Basic when I was a kid. So my Amstrad 6218. So having the math, it's not necessary, but just being able to think in that way has helped me a lot and you know, when you do need to work with formulas or slightly more complex ideas, it's just makes that a little bit easier.

[excerpt from **Lucky Dip** plays]

ECB: You're listening to a site-specific piece, recorded at a festival in Phoenix...

LSH: ...in a hotel that was this wonderful three day event where artist took over lots of the hotel rooms and made them into different installations. And I worked in the hotel swimming pool to install a work for underwater speakers in the pool. I also performed outside the pool with speakers above water. So people could hear the performance and then go into the pool and hear different sounds under water.

[excerpt from **Lucky Dip** plays]

ECB: Lauren has noticed that one particular age group tends to be quite receptive to her music: children.

LSH: It's kind of amusing, because I find that they're much more open to this type of music and I ask them if they've ever heard sounds like this before and they say, "Yeah, we hear stuff like this in games all the time, or in film soundtracks", so I think people are becoming more used to the type of sound worlds that I work with certainly, which is really nice. It seems like the younger generations are maybe becoming more open to it. And also because there's a lot of crossover with stuff that's in commercial pop music I guess, so I guess there's a lot of similar production techniques being used, so maybe these are things that they are picking up on. But I've always played outside of academic venues as well as doing academic conferences as well. I think that's been really important and I think I've been lucky enough to be able to do that and want to keep doing that.

[excerpt of **Scorched Earth** plays]

ECB: This is another recording of one of her guerrilla improvisations.

LSH: We went to the Salton Sea, which is this very strange desert sea in California, which is really an environmental disaster, because it's drying out so it's becoming so saline that the fish and the birds are dying off in millions and we found an old piano frame on the beach there. So I did a performance using this piano frame, there were freight trains in the background, birds, airplanes, so it was yeah, kind of this amazing find.

[excerpt of **Scorched Earth** plays]

ECB: I asked Lauren to speak about her experience of the gender imbalance in her field.

LSH: I don't think I thought about it before being involved in it. And I think the first thing that struck me was that I was the only female on the course. And maybe I didn't think too much of that until I started going to conferences and seeing, ok this pattern is repeating itself everywhere that I go.

ECB: And then when she became a teacher, she grew even more aware, especially of the power of inclusivity in the material she was teaching. For example, in a history of electronic music course, there is a clear choice - to show the class only male composers, OR to include the many other voices that have made an impact in the field.

LSH: Like the women from the Radiophonic Workshop, Daphne Oram, Delia Derbyshire, I feel that it's more my responsibility now to teach that in a different way.

ECB: I asked her if she had any advice for aspiring composers, especially those wanting to work with electronics.

LSH: Advice I would say is that if you have an idea, just don't be put off by anything and anyone that tries to undermine what you are doing. I think one of the main things I experienced is really when men try to intimidate you by fantasizing technology and you know, trying to speak in really technical terms, which didn't phase me, because I understood what they were talking about, but I knew when they were trying to do it. And I think that just being kind of confident that your idea is worth exploring and finding other women who have this interest. There seems to be lots more groups for women to get together and try to explore things in sound.

ECB: For example, groups that organize coding workshops for women.

LSH: So try and see if there's enough stuff like that or set one up, because I'm sure there will be lots of other women interested in doing it. And also just seek out, even if you can't necessarily find a mentor, but seek out role models who you can maybe try and follow some of the trajectory that they've gone through and read interviews with them and you know, look at, where did they start playing and how did that maybe springboard other opportunities. The way I've looked to older women in the field who have been really supportive, I think that's really valuable as well. See if you can find mentors, it's difficult if you don't already have connections, but they are there.

[excerpt of **technoscribble** plays]

ECB: You're listening to technoscribble, from her latest album Manipulation.

[excerpt of **technoscribble** plays]

ECB: If you want to find out more about Lauren, or listen to full streaming tracks of the music excerpted in this episode, just visit the show notes page at www.listeningtoladies.com.

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[excerpt of **technoscribble** plays]

Thank you to all of my Patreon subscribers for helping me continue to showcase these voices. And as ever, thank you to all of you out there for listening.

[excerpt of **technoscribble** plays]